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Higher education, mature students and employment goals: policies and practices in the UK

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Abstract: Many of the key challenges that have for some time been facing the tertiary – or higher - education sector are shared by most parts of the world, including the pressure to meet the needs of the knowledge economy; to improve the skills of the population; and to expand participation, not only for those of school leaving age but for adults of all ages. Responses to these challenges, although to some extent coordinated through international bodies, vary between countries. This article takes a critical look at the case of the UK and its policy responses. The focus is on the growing population of part-time students, and the implications of policies for this group. It presents findings from a major study of mature part-time students, conducted in two university institutions specialising in part-time study. Findings from this study throw doubt on the feasibility of determining *a priori* what kind of study pathway is most conducive for the individual in terms of employment gains and opportunities for upward social mobility, and for the economy as a whole. In conclusion, it cautions against looking to the UK for a model for higher education policies to meet the challenges for higher education in the 21st century. .

Introduction

The engagement of mature students in higher education has become increasingly important in many parts of the developed world. This can be understood in the context of the general expansion of higher education, with its shift from an elite to a mass education system, aimed at meeting the perceived need for a better skilled workforce. The aim of this article is to explore and assess some recent policies in the UK, which are designed to widen and develop the employment related skills of the population. The focus of the article is mainly on the adult population / mature students ('lifelong learning'), whose significance is growing because of the demographic shifts and the ageing of the population.

We begin by examining the meaning of ‘higher education’ and ‘part-time study’ in an international context. We then set out some recent policy developments in the UK. This is followed by an analysis of findings from a major empirical study on part-time students in higher education in the UK. In the final section we discuss recent policies in the light of the data presented, complemented by other sources. The key question we address is: given the UK government’s espoused goals of widening participation, increasing social mobility and meeting the needs of the economy, do these recent policies seem the most effective way of achieving these goals? Since these goals are widely recognised as important throughout the developed world, this UK case study is of relevance more widely, and there are lessons to be learnt for other higher education systems beyond this country.

Lifelong learning and Employment agenda – UK policy in an international context

The expansion of part-time modes of study makes sense in the context of general policy aims for the higher education sector. Internationally there has been growing international concern to increase and diversify the numbers of students in higher education (OECD 2001), framed within the globalisation of the knowledge economy (Archer *et al*, 2003). The lifelong learning agenda across much of developed world has had an increasing focus on a skills agenda (see eg Australian National Training Authority, 1998; Fuwa 2009; European Council, 2000) with an assumption that the more training, skills and qualifications people have, the more likely they are to be in work. Like most countries in the developed world, the lifelong learning and widening participation agenda in the UK is one that has been primarily concerned with skills-based vocational learning. The Leitch Report, *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy: World Class Skills* (HM Treasury, 2006) was an attempt to consider the UK’s long-term goals and outline recommendations for developing skills which would maximise economic prosperity, productivity and social justice. It embedded a growing policy focus on skills development for the workplace, and greater participation from employers in determining learning opportunities and directions, recommending that by 2020 more than 40% of adults be skilled to graduate level and

above. It concluded that economically valuable skills must be delivered through a demand-led approach, facilitated by a new culture of learning, and an appetite for improved skills amongst individuals and employers.

In the UK, this has led to a policy initiative which has been a particularly important milestone in the government's attempts, both to widen participation and to improve the skills base of the workforce: the introduction of foundation degrees, which we discuss further below. Foundation degrees were set up by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2001-02, and are a relatively new intermediate (two-year) vocationally oriented higher education qualification. The primary focus of foundation degrees is to give students the technical and professional skills that are in demand by employers to meet the skills shortage, and form part of the government's strategy for skills development and employability. Much of their curriculum is intended to be employer-led, bringing together both vocational and academic learning identified as desirable by employers (Webb *et al*, 2006). However, they also form a significant part of the government's widening participation strategy, and seek to draw into higher education students from a broader range of backgrounds, who may not otherwise have considered studying at higher levels.

In addition, and linked to foundation degrees, there has been a recent change in the funding of universities, whereby they will no longer receive financial support for those studying for an equivalent or lower qualification than they already possess ('ELQ'). For example, someone who already has a Bachelors degree will not qualify for institutional funding to study for another Bachelors degree, but only to study at a higher – postgraduate – level. The rationale for this policy is partly equity, i.e. those who have not studied at university level before should be given priority (widening of participation), and partly a wish to steer education more directly towards employment related outcomes. Thus the foundation degrees mentioned are exempt from this 'ELQ' rule, and are open to all irrespective of previous qualifications.

Whilst these policies will impact on all students, the impact of lack of funding for those who already have an equivalent or higher qualification can only affect mature students. We are particularly

interested in the implications of a policy firmly located in vocationalism for mature students who are studying part-time. The question we address in this article is whether these policy measures make sense, given what we know about the adult student population, their background, motivations for study and benefits of study. To this end, we set out the context of higher education and part-time study before discussing the findings from a major study of part-time students in higher education.

Higher Education and Part-time study

The term 'higher education' is used in different ways in different societies, and is increasingly referred to as tertiary education, that is post-school education which usually takes place in a university. The distinction drawn between full-time and part-time higher education varies considerably between countries. In some countries (e.g. France, Germany) there is no official distinction; in others (e.g. Canada, the United States) the distinction is mainly based on relative workload. In the United Kingdom (UK) the distinction is made primarily on the basis of funding, and does not always reflect the actual time students spend studying. Despite such definitional problems, it seems quite clear that in practice, part-time students have for some time made up a substantial proportion, typically between one-third and one-half, of the total enrolment of most Western developed systems of formal higher education (Tight 1991; Teicher 2007), and that their numbers are growing. Part-time provision tends to be particularly common at sub-degree level, especially when this focuses on preparation for Bachelors degree course entry, and at postgraduate level. But it also accounts for a considerable proportion of those on undergraduate courses, particularly in North America and Australasia.

Part-time face to face provision is found mainly in densely populated areas, whereas in more rural areas, this form of study tends to be mainly through distance learning. Subjects studied tend to be in the arts and humanities and social science areas, as well as professional studies in health, education and business areas. The growth of part-time study can be understood against the background of changing economic and demographic conditions. Individuals are increasingly expected to learn throughout their lives – or at least working lives – mixing it with work and domestic commitments

(‘lifelong learning’) (Schutze, 1987; Slowey, 1988). ‘All in all, part-time provision remains the most pragmatic means for expanding access, and for encouraging the shift from elite to mass higher education , a key goal for all educational systems’ (Tight 1991).

Turning to the UK, recent decades have witnessed considerable expansion in the number of part-time students. Just under 40% of HE students in this country are formally part-time students (HESA 2009). The intensity of study varies considerably, averaging 37% of the full-time-equivalent (Ramsden and Brown 2006). Nearly 70% study at undergraduate level, the majority of these at sub-degree level (Certificates and Diplomas); a quarter of students are at taught post-graduate level, and about five per cent are post-graduate research students. They tend to be in paid employment, and are more likely to study at a university near their home, or by distance learning. With the exception of research students, a high proportion of part-time students are found in what are known as the ‘post-92’ or ‘new’ universities, i.e. (less research oriented) institutions which have more recently obtained university status. About half of all part-time students are aged 30 – 39, and there are relatively more women. In terms of subjects studied, there are relatively more part-time students in subjects allied to medicine and in education, whereas biological sciences, law, engineering and creative arts are underrepresented.

Despite the growing numbers of part-time students, it is an under researched group, and relatively little is known about them. Recently some studies have begun to fill some of these gaps (Boorman et al 2006; Callender et al 2006; Ramsden & Brown 2006) and in the following we examine findings of one such study, which examined the backgrounds, motivations and benefits of study for part-time students from two major specialist institutions.

Part-time students in higher education: the research project

The study: population and method

In most universities, part-time students form a minority, albeit a growing one, of the institution's student population. However, the two institutions which formed the focus of the study reported here, both specialise in provision for mature part-time students. One is a college which specialises - in face to face provision for part-time students in London, with classes taught mainly in the evenings. The other caters for students throughout the UK and beyond on a distance learning basis. Although not typical UK universities, they represent the two most significant part-time providers in the country, accounting for a sizable proportion of all UK part-time students. Furthermore, we argue that our findings can in some ways be generalised to the part-time student population as a whole. This is partly because, as we shall discuss below, there is no such thing as a typical part-time student, and partly because in some important respects like range of motivations, there are similarities of patterns for this population across UK institutions.

The purpose of the research programme was to investigate the social and economic benefits of part-time mature study. The design was longitudinal with three waves of data collection between 2003 and 2006. The first phase – the baseline study - consisted of a postal questionnaire survey of those who had completed their studies in that year. For the first institution, referred to in the following as 'university 1', questionnaires were sent to the total cohort of 2003 graduates (2,700), yielding 1539 responses. For the second institution, referred to in the following as 'university 2' the questionnaires were sent to a random sample of 2003/04 graduates, yielding 1530 responses. By 'graduates' we refer to those who had completed their programme of study at either certificate/diploma (sub-degree) level, undergraduate or postgraduate levels. This baseline study provided rich information on the socio-economic characteristics of the graduates, their reasons for study and the range of outcomes they experienced immediately after graduating. The second phase consisted of in depth interviews with a sub-sample of respondents. This part of the study explored the meanings of the study outcomes reported in the survey, in the context of the life courses of the individual respondents. The third phase was a three-year follow-up study, conducted in 2006 through a repeat postal questionnaire survey. One aim was to explore whether the benefits (employment related; individual and social) reported three years earlier had increased or decreased over time. A second aim was to put the period of

university study into a broader context of study careers by mapping further study or training activities undertaken since 2003.

In the following, we focus on findings related to what we call *employment orientation*; that is, we focus on how far and in what ways respondents were motivated by employment related goals, and how these related to the outcomes reported. We use primarily the findings from the baseline study, but supplement these with illustrative quotes from the qualitative interviews and selected data from the follow-up study.

The characteristics of the graduates

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 gives an overview of some of the basic characteristics of the respondents. The graduates of the two institutions were similar in some respects. The proportion of women to men was similar at around 60:40, reflecting the national trend. The age distribution was similar, the great majority of graduates being aged between 31 and 60. The majority of graduates had been in employment when they enrolled on their study. Yet the large majority of the students had funded their own studies, reflecting the national picture (60%) (UUK 2006), though relatively more graduates from university 1 were self-funded (77%).

The OU would appear to attract more students aged over 30, and particularly those with full-time domestic responsibilities. The distance learning mode is likely to suit this group in so far as they are tied down with child care. In terms of level of study, undergraduate Certificate/Diplomas and first degree students constituted a larger proportion at university 2, whereas postgraduates figured more prominently in the university 1 population. The subjects studied differed in so far as a sizable proportion of the former students graduated with general degrees, mixing their subject profile much more than the latter students, where the arts subjects figured most prominently.

A considerable proportion of students from both institutions already had a HE level qualification (Table 2). This was particularly the case for university 1, where about a third of undergraduate students and over half of Certificate/Diploma students already had a first degree. This is important to note in the light of the UK government's policy aims, and we shall return to this below.

Study aims/'motivations'

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Respondents were given a battery of statements regarding reasons for study, listed in figure 1.

This figure shows the proportion who agreed with each of the statements. Of all the reasons ticked, those related to subject interest and personal development were chosen by most respondents. Also, getting a recognised qualification was highlighted by the majority. Reasons related to changing job and improving current job were highlighted in about a third to two thirds of cases, and it is important to note that reasons associated with changing the nature of their work or employment figured prominently, especially for those studying at undergraduate level.. Post-graduates in particular highlighted current job improvement as a reason for study. A cluster analysis was conducted aimed at distinguishing individuals in terms of response patterns. It yielded some highly complex categories, reflecting the diversity of the student body and the mix of factors motivating the individual, and also suggesting that individuals themselves are not always clear about study aims and reasons (Feinstein et al 2007). The following quote illustrates the complexity of motivations and therefore the difficulty of *a priori* categorising students in terms of motivations.

I just did it because I was interested, I never did it thinking I'm gonna get a better job although, you know, supposedly in the back of my mind I thought maybe I would get a better job..

Employment related benefits

Benefits to the graduates were identified in three areas: skills development, personal benefits and employment related outcomes. In this article we focus on the employment related outcomes.

At the time of the survey, shortly after graduation, most graduates appeared to have the same employment status, and to be in the same type of work, as when they began studying. Around one third felt they had been helped in their current job and/or it had become more satisfying. Over a half said that their career opportunities had improved, and that they expected future benefits including a higher income. In the three-year follow-up study, significant changes were reported. Thus for the population of university 1, the proportion who had got a job with a different employer, had increased from 15% to 27%, and the proportion who had been promoted had increased from 7% to 24%. In the majority of cases, the college study was reported to have played an important role.

Employer support for HE study is generally modest. Nationally, about 15% of part-time students receive financial support from their employer. Post-graduates receive most support (25%), compared with only 13% of those studying for first degrees (UUK 2006). For the graduates in this study, the figures were slightly lower, reflecting the pattern of provision. Just over 11% had received full or part funding from their employers, and there was no difference between those who already had an HE qualification and others. The proportion who gave 'employer requirement' as a reason for study was very low, less than five per cent., Yet, in response to questions about employment related reasons for study, just over a quarter of the total population reported that their course related to their employment at the start of the course, though for post-graduates, the figure was higher. When asked whether they expected their course to relate to their employment in the next five years, an even higher proportion – around 60% – students, responded positively. Overall, most responses to questions regarding employment related benefits were similar for those who already had a previous HE qualification (ELQ students) as for those with lower levels of qualification on entry. It seems therefore that overall the ELQ students were not significantly different from non-ELQ students. Both groups included respondents who reported employment related reasons for study, but these tended to be diffuse and

future oriented expectations rather than concrete well defined plans related to specific jobs. This is well illustrated in the following quote from an undergraduate ELQ student:

...it was just for interest, it was purely for interest because I already had academic qualifications.....well, there has been one benefit for work...I applied for this job at... when I started in 2001.....to be able to put on my CV that I was studying, I think helped me to get the job because the culture of this place it very much values academic qualifications, and then when I transferred tolast summer, to be able to put recent academic qualifications down even though- well, I think actually particularly because they were completely irrelevant... helped me both- helped my credibility....

This is further emphasised in the responses about outcomes of study: over half the respondents said it had increased their job opportunities, and the undergraduate ELQ students' responses were only slightly lower (40% of those with a first degree on entry, and 50% of those with a post-graduate qualification on entry). Future job prospects could be as important as improvement of current job situation. One interviewee put this very succinctly:

... I think it's generally true that their present employer doesn't value the qualification that they've got whilst in their employment, and it's only your next employer that notices that you [have been a student]...

Study conclusions

A study based on two institutions only clearly has some limitations when it comes to generalising for the whole sector. However, our comparison with national survey data (Ramsden & Brown 2006) suggested that in terms of motivation and employer engagement, the populations in our study are very similar to the general population. Thus it is clear, both from national data and from our research, that

the population of part-time students is highly diverse, both in terms of their life course situation and in regard to their reasons for studying. There are some who study for reasons of ‘personal development’, whether it is to give meaning to life in retirement, to cope with life transitions such as divorce or ‘empty nest’, or simply curiosity to expand their knowledge. Many of these already have a higher education qualification, and whether their study activities should receive public support is an important issue, which is however outside the scope of this article. Our focus is upon the government agenda and whether *on its own terms* it is likely to achieve its stated aims. In this respect our findings suggest that it is often very difficult, if not impossible to determine in advance what kind of study yields employment benefits. It is evident that a considerable proportion of our respondents derived employment benefits, despite the fact that their initial study aims had been vague and diffuse. It was also clear that for most, their current employers were not actively engaged in promoting or supporting their study. This was further underlined by the fact that many studied in order to change their job, i.e. for the potential benefit of future employers. Finally, we showed how a significant proportion of those who were already qualified at HE level and studied for another undergraduate qualification, did in fact do so for employment reasons and/or derived employment benefits. This throws doubt on the government’s wisdom of excluding such ‘ELQ’ students from public support. One of the few funded avenues to HE study for these students would be through a Foundation Degree (FD). Our findings suggest that this particular group of students would not be likely to embark on an FD, and the opportunities for them to study may have been lost. The question which arises then is whether and in what ways these students would be replaced by others who would not otherwise have been likely to engage in higher education. In other words, are FDs likely to be effective in achieving the goal of widening participation?

Foundation degrees

As mentioned above, foundation degrees are short-cycle degrees and the equivalent to 240 of the 360 credits required for a Bachelors degree. The majority of them are run in partnerships between higher education institutions (normally universities) and further education colleges. Further education colleges are most commonly associated with the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, and may be compared with community colleges in the United States. They mainly offer post-compulsory education (from the age of 16) and can include work based learning, adult and community education, as well as a range of sub-degree and vocational qualifications and training. Although further education colleges have not previously been allowed to validate their own degrees, from 2008-09, these colleges have been able to award their own foundation degrees. Excluding 6th form colleges (further education colleges specifically aimed at 16-18 year olds), over 90% of further education colleges are involved in foundation degree provision. In the light of the new legislation on funding for equivalent or lower level qualifications (see below), this may rise even higher for further education colleges in a similar way to expected HE expansion, especially with the increasing policy emphasis being placed on vocational qualifications.

Foundation degrees are primarily aimed at associate professional / higher technician level (Parry 2005) and, despite being a short-cycle qualification, carry degree status. This could be considered a strength. For example, Doyle (2003) argues that with the UK government trying to negotiate a third way between democratising higher education and developing a sound economic base for the country, foundation degrees open up new opportunities for diversity through partnerships between higher and further education institutions. However, others have argued that using the term 'degree' creates an illusion of parity between foundation degrees and bachelors degrees that does not in fact exist either for students or employers (Gibbs, 2002).

Although foundation degrees are vocational qualifications, they do not necessarily provide new work initiatives. They 'offer employers the opportunity to enhance staff training and development with minimal disruption to the business operation' (Foundation Degrees Forward), and students on

foundation degrees are normally already working in a specific workplace setting which enables the required workplace learning to take place. It can prove particularly difficult for people who are working full-time but who want to change career direction and set out to take a foundation degree part-time, often in the evenings, as workplace or workbased learning becomes very difficult to access.

The report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2008) provides a profile of current foundation degree students in England (based on 2005-06 entrants). The report shows that 17% of foundation degree students already hold higher education qualifications and this number is likely to grow, possibly significantly, in the light of foundation degree exemption from the withdrawal of state funding from 2008-09 for any students who are studying for an equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ) than one already held. This means that students who already have a qualification at any level who want to undertake new study and / or training can do so without financial penalty to themselves or the institution by enrolling on a foundation degree. Were they to embark on any other higher education award or qualification that was equivalent to or lower than one they already hold, the institution would get no state funding and student fees would of necessity be correspondingly higher. Although the majority of foundation degree students do not currently have experience of higher education (72% full-time and 52% of part-time), this may well change in the future.

The development of foundation degrees is of interest in any engagement with mature part-time students in higher education. A substantial number (38%) of all foundation degree students are studying part-time; and secondly whilst the majority of full-time entrants are taught at FE colleges, the majority of part-time students registered are taught in higher education institutions. In addition, the majority of foundation degree students are 'mature' (aged over 21), although there are gender differences, and 72% of female foundation degrees students are aged 21 or over, as are 55% male students. Although full-time students consist of almost equal numbers of women and men (51% and 49% respectively), for part-time study this changes significantly to 66% and 34% respectively.

The data for socio-economic status is complex. Attempts across the higher education sector to boost the number of pupils from deprived neighbourhoods going on to higher education has not resulted in

any significant increases (Universities UK, 2008). Although more young entrants on foundation degrees (under 21) studying full-time register with higher education institutions rather than further education colleges (74%), entrants from neighbourhoods with a low participation rate in post-compulsory education are more likely to register with a further education colleges than a higher education institution. This suggests that although there may be a positive take-up of places by students who may not have otherwise considered higher education, there may be a pattern of self-selection into further education colleges, which carry less status and esteem than higher education institutions.

Although it is still early days, foundation degrees appear to be proving a popular choice and numbers are significant and growing. By 2010 there are likely to be around 100,000 studying on foundation degrees in England (HEFCE, 2008). Employers have been told that foundation degrees will lead to workforce development and greater social mobility. They are said to help develop, upskill and retain the current workforce, leading to more flexible employees. Flexibility will be of some benefit to the workforce, giving greater opportunities for employment in changing markets. However, the workplace remains highly gendered, as do ways of measuring productivity (Walby and Olsen, 2002). Learning does not appear to balance out gender inequalities in the workplace, and divisions of labour remain gendered, classed and racialised (Jackson, 2004). For example, women who are employed full-time are still paid only around 84% of men's hourly rate. For women employed part-time the figures are even worse, with a pay gap of 39% (Government Equalities Office) and, due to child care and other caring responsibilities, women are significantly more likely than men to be employed part-time. Amongst women there is still a disparity in the workplace. Women from working-class or lower socio-economic backgrounds are likely to earn significantly less than those from middle-class or higher socio-economic backgrounds, and employment rates for minority ethnic women is lower than those for white women (Government Equalities Office).

What the Leitch Report (see above) fails to recognise is that in a gendered and classed labour market, the acquisition of economically valuable skills is no guarantee of an economically valuable job

(Jackson, 2007). Whilst foundation degrees might open up training routes, they are designed to equip students with the technical skills needed by employers (Webb *et al* 2006), and employment is still organised hierarchically, with low-knowledge skilled women and men at the bottom rungs and in low-paid insecure work (Brine 1999; Toynbee 2003). An engagement with the intersections between gender and social class are central in any examination of the potentiality of vocational routes to widen participation to higher education and effect longer term egalitarian outcomes in the workplace. Furthermore, despite the rhetoric of lifelong learning and widening participation which show a more inclusive system of higher education (Layer, 2005), an expanded mass higher education system has in many ways embedded social stratification (Jackson, 2007; Reay *et al.*, 2005). For example, whilst more students from lower socio-economic groups and working-class backgrounds are going to university, the balance between the social groups remains pretty much unchanged. There is still a large gap in entry to higher education by social class, with students from middle-class or higher socio-economic backgrounds three times more likely to go to university than those from poorer backgrounds (UK National Statistics). And as Quinn *et al.* (2006) have shown, even by going to university young working class men do not necessarily escape classed or gendered norms.

There are those who argue that foundation degrees can enable the development of inclusive practices. For example, Wilson *et al* (2005) argue that British higher education institutions have been able to develop innovative pedagogic practices within some foundation degrees. They give examples of those designing foundation degrees located in the public sector who have attempted to reduce academic and vocational divides, improve intermediate skills, develop vocational progression and widen participation to higher education. However, Edmund *et al* (2007) explore the tensions between the various stakeholders in foundation degrees, demonstrating the increasing importance of employer engagement. They challenge the assumption that employer engagement necessarily leads to better work based learning, and suggest that lack of employer engagement should be sanctioned at the level of individual programmes. Employers are being told that they must shape higher education to meet their own needs, and to ensure that the skills delivered in this work-based qualification are a real asset to them, although little is known of the impact that employers have in curriculum development for

foundation degrees (see eg Edmond *et al*, 2007; King, 2007). It has yet to be seen whether foundation degrees will embed differences of social class and gender still further, or help militate against such differences, offering expanded opportunities in the labour market and the development of lifelong engagement with learning.

Conclusions

In this article we have been interested in exploring the lifelong learning and employment agenda in the context of an expanded higher education system and changing political priorities of social mobility, widening participation and vocational education. These are priorities for policymakers across the developed world. We have been particularly interested in mature students studying part-time, as relatively less research has focused on these, despite the emphasis on lifelong learning in the international policy arena. We have analysed policy responses in the UK in the light of some relevant empirical evidence on part-time students, and believe that the lessons from this are relevant and useful beyond the UK. The analysis of findings from the empirical study of mature graduates has demonstrated that the picture is more complex than government policies might suggest, with reasons for study which include a range of motivations, and limited employer support. In addition, although employment related motivations were most often associated with a wish to change jobs or career directions, this is not easily facilitated through foundation degrees, which aim to help employers offer staff development with minimum disruption. They rarely appear to offer students the opportunity to develop in new directions, and this is particularly pertinent to mature women who may have taken career breaks, especially when gender disparities in the workplace remain.

The ELQ policy in the UK is particularly damaging to mature students, including those studying part-time, and the exemption of foundation degrees from this policy does not mitigate against the discrimination which will face those wishing to extend their lifelong learning through the intersections of career and personal development. As we have shown, mature students (and others) engage in learning for a range of complex and diffuse reasons, and benefits for employment may come from unexpected quarters, and were shown to include a range of highly important generic skills for work.

In addition, employers do not in the main contribute to or support their employees' study, and indeed this may be seen as contrary to their interests, as many students engage in higher education qualifications to *change* jobs. We conclude that the case of the UK serves to illustrate the potential weaknesses of policies that are narrowly focused on what is defined *a priori* to be 'economically useful', whether to the individual or to society as a whole. We believe that policymakers beyond the UK could usefully learn from this, and also recognise the need for further research evidence to inform policy decisions.

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Table 1 Characteristics of Respondents.

	University 1	University 2
	%	%
Sex (female)	64	60
Level of qualification completed		
Undergraduate Degree	23	31
Post-graduate	38	14
Certificate/Diploma	39	55
Funding		
Mainly self	77	61
Mainly employer	9	16
Self & employer	7	5
Other sources	8	18
Subject of study		
Business	15	7
Science	13	17
Arts	39	12
Social Science	32	43
Combined	--	21
Age		
Age 30 & under	20	12
Age 31-40	35	33
Age 41-50	22	33
Age 51-60	12	14
Age 61+	8	7
Labour force status on entry		
Prior LFS (Full-Time)	57	58
Prior LFS (Part-Time)	10	13
Prior LFS (Carer)	4	10
Prior LFS (Unemployed)	3	8
Prior LFS (Self-employed)	6	5
Prior LFS (Retired)	6	6
Source: Surveys. Proportions may not add to 100 because of missing values. University 2 data are weighted by level of study.		

Figure 1. Reasons for study. The two institutions compared

